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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dillon, N. (2018). Migration Nation: Barriers to integration for asylum-seekers in Ireland. *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, 4(2), 51-69. <https://doi.org/10.18193/sah.v4i2.173>

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Migration Nation: Barriers to integration for asylum-seekers in Ireland

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Abstract

Issues relating to the welfare of asylum-seekers are relatively recent in the Irish context. This is largely due to the historically low numbers of people seeking refuge in Ireland for a variety of geographical and administrative reasons. This piece focuses on one such administrative issue, the continued struggle at national level to design and implement a fair and transparent policy to process and accommodate asylum-seekers. Specifically, this piece looks at the integration strategies of two local authorities to investigate whether the initiatives outlined within these strategies sufficiently address the needs of those within the asylum system. The initiatives were implemented in accordance with a national statement outlining the need for integration strategies for migrants into Ireland. The piece offers a qualitative analysis of two integration strategies in Clare and Limerick with the purpose of ascertaining whether these initiatives sufficiently address the needs of those within the asylum system.

Keywords: Direct Provision, Asylum Policy, Integration,

Introduction

In June 2013, residents at Drishane Castle Direct Provision centre (DPC) in Millstreet, County Cork held peaceful protests against the conditions within the centre, specifically highlighting the lack of a play area for children and the poor quality of the food provided. Some sources reported that the residents were being served food which had passed its expiry date.¹ The following year a video was circulated on social media showing the punitive and restrictive conditions at Mount Trenchard in Foynes, County Limerick. This footage highlighted the inhumanity of the living conditions with one resident commenting that the centre was ‘a jungle and a jail’.² In May 2015 the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) found serious concerns in relation to child protection and welfare services for children in Direct Provision. Findings included: physical or mental illness of parents impacting on their capacity to provide quality care for children, mental health issues for children and parents, lack of clothes and toys,

¹ Eoin English, ‘Refugees urged to use complaints procedure’, *The Examiner*, June 27, 2013, <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/refugees-urged-to-use-complaints-procedure-235205.html#>.

² Sinead O’ Shea, ‘Limerick asylum seekers’ centre a jungle and a jail’, *The Irish Times*, Sept 5, 2014, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/limerick-asylum-seekers-centre-a-jungle-and-a-jail-1.1918384>.

and parents isolating themselves and their children from networks and support services.³ These issues, among many others which will be addressed in this piece, highlight the necessity for those living within the asylum system to be provided with adequate resources to aid their integration to the communities in which they now live, and to allow access to services provided at local level.

This paper examines local strategies set up to integrate new migrant communities into Ireland and examines whether these strategies address the complex and varied needs which are specific to people within the asylum system. In 2008 ‘Migration Nation’ was launched by the Irish Government. It was a statement on Integration and Diversity Management. At the launch of the policy statement, the then Minister for Integration Conor Lenihan T.D. said that a key facet of the strategy would be a mainstream approach to the delivery of services to migrants to avoid the advent of parallel communities. He outlined that the new policy of integration would focus on the role of local authorities, political parties and other local groups to achieve this goal.⁴ This piece will assess whether the actions outlined by the Minister incorporate the needs specific to asylum-seekers.

Methods

Creswell⁵ maintains that the case study approach is the best approach to take when the researcher has identified a clear case with boundaries and seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within these boundaries. While case studies can explore single or multiple cases, a collective case study approach was taken to provide an understanding of the phenomenon from multiple sites. In the context of this research, the cases under investigation were the integration strategies implemented in Limerick and Clare under the terms of ‘Migration Nation.’

Quinn Patton⁶ describes in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis as the three most commonly used types of data collection tools when undertaking qualitative research. Having recognised the incompatibility of observations with the research design, the remaining two data collection tools were instead employed. Four semi-structured interviews were undertaken with individuals involved in the design and implementation of the integration strategies, two from Limerick and two from Clare. As well as being familiar with the strategies, these participants all worked in areas where they had regular contact with asylum-seekers and were therefore in a position to identify the needs specific to those within the asylum system and to assess whether or not these needs were met under the terms of the integration plans. The research findings were also informed by an in-depth analysis of the policy documents published on the integration strategies in each location. Document analysis can provide an insight into an area that may not be directly observable through other methods, and by employing multiple data collection tools, a more valid and reliable piece of research is produced.

Data collected in the research process were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The following are the themes that emerged from the analysis; Relevance of the

³ ‘Direct Provision must end if Ireland is serious about the rights of children, says Irish Refugee Council’, Irish Refugee Council, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/news/direct-provision-must-end-if-ireland-is-serious-about-the-rights-of-children-says-irish-refugee-council/4595>.

⁴ Minister for Integration, launches “Migration Nation” a Statement on Integration Strategy and Diversity Management’, Department of Justice and Equality, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Migration%20Nation%20Launch>.

⁵ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2nd edition, 2006).

⁶ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1990).

Strategy, Barriers to Participation (Access, Transport and Economic Factors), Time, The Transition from Asylum-Seeker to Refugee, Addressing Mental Health Issues and the Needs of Children, Employment and Education and Structural Weaknesses in the Asylum Process.

Migration, Asylum, Integration and Public Policy Theory

Migration and Integration Theories

White has emphasised the need for further research into the theoretical frameworks surrounding asylum and refugee studies.⁷ He does, however, state that some theoretical approaches related to human geography and labour migration could be applied to better understand the issue. He argues that theories relating to international migration focus too much on the economic, rationalist model in their explanation of migration flows. Migration as a social construction is not addressed in these theories.

Theories relating to integration in the European context can also be applied to current Irish immigration and asylum policy. Piaras Mac Einri outlines two main integration models which can be used in this context.⁸ These are assimilation, where immigrants are encouraged to adopt the cultural and societal norms of the country they reside in, and multiculturalism, where diverse cultures and ethnicities are welcomed. He calls the assimilationist approach ‘the French model’ and labels the multiculturalist approach ‘the British model’. He also argues that a third model could be included, which he refers to as *Gastarbeiter*, or ‘the German model’, in which the migrant is seen as temporary and only of value to the economic development of the destination state.

Assessing the needs of Asylum-Seekers

Much of the literature available on the subject focuses on the mental health implications of long-term confinement in restrictive reception centers, such as Direct Provision centers in the Irish case. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in its global strategy for governments to end the detention of asylum-seekers and refugees, has suggested that some governments may use methods of detention, such as DP in the Irish case, to deter immigrants from entering their states.⁹ However, research shows that this has little if any impact on the numbers of asylum-seekers who enter these states. The negative long-term effects this detention can have on individuals, including consequences for health and well-being, is also highlighted in the UNHCR report. Many asylum-seekers will already have suffered traumatic experiences prior to their arrival and the conditions in which they are forced to live only serve to exacerbate their fear, frustration and anxiety. In fact, the report outlines the impact that the substandard and precarious conditions of these centers can have, particularly on minors and people with additional needs.

Slobodin and De Jong assert that refugees and asylum-seekers are forced migrants.¹⁰ They note that the act of migration occurs in three stages, each of which can result in trauma for the individual involved. Prior to migration, these traumas can include war, violence, torture and persecution. During migration, refugees and asylum-seekers can become victims of human

⁷ Allen White, ‘Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Human Geography: Some Theoretical Perspectives’, *The Internet Journal of Research in Population Studies and Demography* (1998).

⁸ Piaras Mac Einri, ‘Integration Models and Choices’ in *Immigration and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*, ed. Bryan Fanning (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 214-237.

⁹ UNHCR, ‘Beyond Detention: A Global Strategy to Support Governments to End the Detention of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees 2014-2015’, *International Journal of Refugee Law* 27, no. 2 (2015): 375-389.

¹⁰Ortal Slobodin and Joop TVM de Jong, ‘Mental health interventions for traumatized asylum seekers and refugees: What do we know about their efficacy?’, *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 61, no. 1 (2015): 17-26.

trafficking or be subjected to sexual or labour exploitation through force or coercion. However, post-migration, once they have arrived in their 'safe' country, the mental-health implications of these events can be exacerbated through lack of social supports, poverty and discrimination, as well as changes to concepts of identity. Within reception centres, individuals can be exposed to threatening and frightening situations such as sexual harassment, inadequate food, lack of healthcare, etc. Slobodin and De Jong argue that all these factors can often lead to psychiatric disorders among the residents of the centres. These include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety- and grief-related disorders, amongst others. They argue that the General Practitioners (GPs) that mainly treat these patients are often not equipped with the specific expertise related to these disorders, and that, in general, the mental health services available to asylum-seekers are insufficient and inadequate.

Julie Sugarman writes that across Europe, schools are under extreme pressure at present as the need for access to education for migrant children has never been greater.¹¹ This, she says, is due to increases in migration flows stemming from the current humanitarian crisis. She argues that for the most part, schools are not equipped with the resources to address the linguistic, academic and socio-emotional needs of these children. She concludes that significant development and policy implementation to meet these children's needs at local level is necessary. The Irish Refugee Council also highlight issues relating to children in the asylum system. It notes that while children have access to primary and secondary education, there is sometimes difficulty securing these school places. Children in DPCs do not have access to the resources which children require to meet their developmental milestones.¹² Uchechukwu Ogbu, et al. argue that growing up in Direct Provision can have a detrimental effect on family functioning and child development.¹³ Access to resources outside of the centres would benefit children and aid their cognitive and social development.

Research from the Netherlands identifies several constraints which impede asylum-seekers' integration into the wider community. Firstly, they note that in the Netherlands, as in Ireland, many of the centres are in rural areas, which makes the residents' participation in community activities quite difficult. Furthermore, asylum-seekers are restricted to specific meal-times and other regulated activities which dictate how long they can stay away from the centre. Alternatively, activities which are organised within the centres are arranged in large groups which can lead to issues with privacy and autonomy. The research argues that long stays in this type of environment, where social interaction is minimal and personal development is inhibited, are damaging for the residents.¹⁴

Public Policy Theories

Public policy is often considered a way in which the government responds to a situation put to them for consideration or possible action. It is oriented towards a goal or a possible solution to

¹¹ Julie Sugarman, 'Meeting the Education Needs of Rising Numbers of Newly Arrived Migrant Students in Europe and the United States', Migration Policy Institute, November 2015, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/meeting-education-needs-rising-numbers-newly-arrived-migrant-students-europe-and-united-states>.

¹² 'Irish Refugee Council's report on Children in Direct Provision', Irish Refugee Council, 2012, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/children-and-young-people/children-in-direct-provision-accommodation/two-page-report-summary>.

¹³ Helen Uchechukwu Ogbu, Bernadine Brady, and Louise Kinlen, 'Parenting in direct provision: Parents' perspectives regarding stresses and supports', *Child Care in Practice* 20, no. 3 (2014): 256-269.

¹⁴ Linda Bakker, Jaco Dagevos, and Godfried Engbersen, 'The importance of resources and security in the socio-economic integration of refugees. A study on the impact of length of stay in asylum accommodation and residence status on socio-economic integration for the four largest refugee groups in the Netherlands', *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 15, no. 3 (2014): 431-448.

the problem at hand.¹⁵ Thomas Bryer argues that the dismissal of bureaucratic responsiveness as a central concept related to public administration is ill-considered and premature.¹⁶ He notes that the traditional method of technical-rational public administration which has dominated public policy practices for decades has been at a crossroads in recent times. This is due to the moral evolution of society in which citizens are keen to collaborate with the administrators that make and implement decisions on their behalf. Where once administrators were concerned only with obligations of performance and behaviour, they are now confronted with ethical obligations to the actors that constitute that society.

Cooke and Muir introduce the concept of the relational state, which, they argue, should help to reframe the dominant economic policy goals and provide a guide to better practices for policy and action based on the best model of government, suited to the needs of all stakeholders within the state.¹⁷ They argue that previous methods of public policy and administration have neglected the importance of human relationships when it comes to the drafting of policies which will affect these actors. They note that good relationships between individuals and administrators are essential to providing more efficient services and improving the lives of those that depend on these services. They also emphasise that these relationships need to be given greater priority as a goal of the policy outcome instead of the general priorities of adherence to regulations from above. In the Irish context, public policy processes follow the control-centred perspective of bureaucracy. However, in the case of immigration and asylum policy, a discretionary or deliberative approach would be more beneficial as it is necessary to take the needs of the actors into consideration before drafting the policies by which they are bound. If administrators at a local level had discretion to adapt local policies to the particular contexts in which they operate, more satisfactory outcomes could be provided to those within the asylum system.

The Asylum System in Ireland

The system of Direct Provision, which marked its eighteenth anniversary in 2018, was initially introduced as a temporary measure to accommodate the increasing number of people seeking asylum in Ireland at the end of the 1990s. According to a Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) report,¹⁸ the scheme was piloted in Dublin under the Directorate for Asylum Support Services. The government acquired accommodation from the various Health Board areas in which they housed those seeking asylum and other forms of protection. This system was intended to provide individuals with adequate accommodation on a full-board basis, including measures destined to meet all their basic needs. Having deemed the pilot a success, the government rolled out the scheme in April 2000 subsequent to its adoption as an official government policy. Claire Breen argues that far from being a success, the introduction of Direct Provision was in fact a violation of the fundamental human rights of those within the asylum system.¹⁹ Furthermore, she states that if the Irish government was to interpret the laws relating to the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers correctly, they would have to abolish the system completely.

¹⁵ Thomas A. Birkland, *An introduction to the policy process: theories, concepts and models of public policy making*. (New York: ME Sharpe, 2011).

¹⁶ Thomas A. Bryer, 'Toward a relevant agenda for a responsive public administration', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 17, no. 3 (2006): 479-500.

¹⁷ Graeme Cooke and Rick Muir, eds., *The Relational State: How Recognising the Importance of Human Relationships Could Revolutionise the Role of the State* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2012).

¹⁸ *One Size Doesn't Fit All: A Legal Analysis of the Direct Provision and Dispersal System in Ireland: 10 Years On* (Dublin: FLAC, 2009).

¹⁹ Claire Breen, 'The policy of direct provision in Ireland: A violation of asylum seekers' right to an adequate standard of housing', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 20, no. 4 (2008): 611-636.

The Directorate for Asylum Support Services was subsequently replaced by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) on 2 April 2001. The United Nations and other international human rights organizations have criticised the system implemented by the state-run agency RIA.²⁰ Former Supreme Court Judge Catherine McGuinness has gone as far as to say that in years to come, a future government will have to publicly apologise for the damage inflicted on those who have had to endure the Direct Provision system.²¹ According to the RIA website, the agency carries out regular inspections on the centres with the intention of making improvements to living conditions where necessary.²² In reality, however, research carried out by an *Irish Times* investigative team found that more than a decade after the introduction of DP, conditions remained at a sub-standard level.²³

At present there are approximately 4,500 asylum-seekers²⁴ living in thirty-five DPCs across Ireland, 77% of those have spent at least 3 years in Direct Provision.²⁵ The length of time spent in these centres ranges from between less than a year to more than seven years. From 2000 to 2015, an allowance of €19.10 was provided on a weekly basis to adults, with children receiving €9.50. In 2016 the rate for children was raised to €15.60 and in 2017 the adult allowance was increased to €21.60. In October 2018, as part of the 2019 Budget, a further increase was announced, bringing the allowances to €38.80 for adults and to €29.80 for children. Evidence suggests that the standards of accommodation and living conditions can vary widely from centre to centre and are, for the most part, managed by private contractors on a for-profit basis, on behalf of the state.²⁶

Steven Loyal states that there are two perspectives which should be considered when looking at the system of Direct Provision.²⁷ The first is the one presented by the government and the other, more important, viewpoint is that of the asylum-seeker who lives within the system and has first-hand experience with the conditions. Loyal illustrates this when he explains how one resident of Knockalisheen DPC in County Clare described the system as a prison, more suited to house animals than humans. The resident felt that the centre should be destroyed. A government official, on the other hand, described it as a fair, humane and ‘cost-effective’ means of providing accommodation and other necessities to asylum-seekers. Loyal maintains that the cramped living conditions and lack of privacy and autonomy can have implications on the mental health of the residents.

Integration Plans

A further government response to the growing number of asylum applications was the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Integration (now the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, or OPMI) in June 2007. The integration function of the RIA was assigned to this new ministerial office in July of the same year.²⁸ According to their website,

²⁰ Carl O’Brien, ‘Lives in Limbo: Life inside Ireland’s direct provision system for asylum seekers’, *The Irish Times*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo>.

²¹ Carl O’Brien and Sinead O’Shea, ‘Could direct provision be the subject of a future government apology?’, *The Irish Times*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/could-direct-provision-be-the-subject-of-a-future-government-apology-1.1894031>.

²² ‘Direct Provision’, RIA, 2015. Accessed Nov 28, 2018, http://www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/Pages/Direct_Provision_FAQs

²³ O’Brien, ‘Lives in Limbo’.

²⁴ This figure includes 1,500 children.

²⁵ ‘Oireachtas Debate Thursday 28 September 2017’, Houses of the Oireachtas, accessed 28 November 2018, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2017-09-28/57/>

²⁶ ‘Direct Provision and Asylum System’, Doras Luimní, <http://dorasluimni.org/direct-provision/>.

²⁷ Steven Loyal, *Understanding Immigration in Ireland: State, Capital and Labour in a Global Age* (Manchester University Press, 2011).

²⁸ ‘Direct Provision’, RIA.

the OPMI has a cross-departmental mandate to develop, lead and coordinate migrant integration policy across other departments, agencies and services. The mandate includes the promotion of the integration of legal immigrants into Irish society.²⁹ In 2008, a national policy statement entitled 'Migration Nation' was launched by the then Minister for Integration Conor Lenihan T.D. The statement referred to integration strategy and diversity management. It emphasised a need for a focus at the local level on the integration of those entering new communities.³⁰ Further to this policy statement, the OPMI allocated funding to local authorities to promote integration at the local level, encouraging them to implement integration initiatives with the assistance of local groups. A number of local authorities have also developed integration strategies and action plans. The OPMI stressed that these integration plans should allow for adequate flexibility that suited the circumstances unique to each community. They encouraged a partnership approach between local authorities and key service providers, social partner bodies, community groups representing and working with ethnic minorities and other local development agencies. The OPMI stressed that all of these stakeholders should be involved in the development and implementation of the integration plans.³¹ The following integration strategies were developed in counties Clare and Limerick under the terms of 'Migration Nation'.

Limerick Integration Plan 2013-2016

The Limerick Integration Working Group (IWG) describes integration as a long-term multidimensional and dynamic process which begins the moment a person arrives in their new community. The aim of the working group was to ensure respect for diversity and equal opportunities for the participation of all Limerick residents regardless of their cultural or religious background, age, gender or nationality. According to the working group, integration takes place through the interaction of people and implies mutual understanding as well as shared rights and responsibilities.³² This integration plan is preceded by the *Limerick Integration Plan 2010-2012*, which, according to the authors, had a strong record of achievement and provided a good foundation for the promotion of integration and inclusion of migrants in Limerick. This working group includes nineteen statutory, voluntary and community groups and is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the Integration Plan. According to the authors of the integration plan, McHugh and Quinn, the working group is committed to progressing integration measures, celebrating diversity and enhancing social cohesion in Limerick City and County.

According to the IWG, the plan was developed using the EU Common Basic Principles (CBP) as a framework. The CBP aim to offer Member States a guideline of basic principles with which they can develop their own integration policies. It also adheres to the conclusions, principles and agendas of the European Ministerial Conference on Integration: the Zaragoza Declaration (2010), which sought to promote integration as a driver for development and social cohesion while emphasising the role of local authorities and cities in dealing with intercultural challenges. After undertaking research, consultation and a needs analysis, six key themes were identified by the working group. These were: *Language, Education and Lifelong Learning, Information, Advice and Direct Support Services, Access to Public Services, Intercultural Awareness, Supporting Communities and Active Citizenship and Employment*. Each of these

²⁹ 'About Us', Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://www.integration.ie/en/ISEC/Pages/IntegrationPolicy>

³⁰ *Limerick Integration Plan 2013-2016*, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://dorasluimni.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/IntergratingLimerick2013-2016.pdf>.

³¹ 'About Us', Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, <http://www.integration.ie/en/ISEC/Pages/IntegrationPolicy>

³² *Limerick Integration Plan 2013-2016*.

themes was then broken down into specific subgroups based on the needs identified in the research and consultation process. Further to this, each theme within the plan is linked with one of the EU Principles on Integration. The IWG was also tasked with overseeing the implementation of the integration plan and developing operational action plans on a yearly basis to monitor the progress of the strategy.

In May 2014, the non-profit organisation Doras Luimní made a submission to the OPMI highlighting the barriers to some of the services and actions proposed in the integration plan. One of the concerns that they outlined was the absence of a national policy relating to integration, stating the need for a suitable environment for best policy and practice in relation to migrant issues. They also outlined that asylum-seekers were not included in national integration policies and this, they felt, immediately excluded certain groups of people from community integration which was in direct contrast to the mandate of the strategy. They recommended the implementation of a national plan which would incorporate local strategies and EU-wide intercultural perspectives. This strategy, they stated, should be co-ordinated by a state body, such as the OPMI, to ensure that all goals set out in the policy would be achieved.³³

Clare Strategic Actions 2009-2012

The Strategy for the Coordination of Services to the Immigrant Communities in County Clare was set up following two needs analyses conducted by both the University of Limerick and the Health Services Executive. Key contributors to the strategy were Clare County Council, HSE, Clare Youth Service, Gardai, Ennis CDP, Clarecare, Ennis Schools Completion, Vocational Education Committees (VEC) and other local service providers who participated in strategic planning workshops, discussion groups and forums. The main stakeholder was Clare Immigrant Support Centre which facilitated thirty-one of the eighty-three actions proposed in the strategy, which were also informed and developed through focus groups with agencies and immigrant groups. The strategy was co-financed by the European Commission under the European Integration Fund and supported by the OPMI.³⁴

The strategy was divided into five themes: *Health, Education, Work and Training, Language/Communication and Community Participation/Social Supports*, informed by a 2009 needs analysis carried out by the University of Limerick entitled 'Getting to Know You - A Local Study of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers in County Clare'. This study provided a comprehensive analysis of each thematic area with the participation of over 130 members of immigrant communities representing over forty nationalities.³⁵ The strategy focused on the following target groups: young migrant workers from the ten EU accession states (2004), older migrant workers from the same EU accession states, members of the African community, members of the Roma Community, refugees and asylum-seekers. Like the Limerick strategy, each action was given a projected result and contained a specific monitoring mechanism. A lead organization and possible partner were also identified for each plan within the strategy. The key principles of the strategy were; a partnership approach between local agencies to improve the coordination of services to the immigrant community in County Clare, a commitment to supporting the inclusion of new communities and recognising their needs in the planning and development of services, a clear focus and direction towards improving

³³ Doras Luimní, *Submission to the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration On Integration Policy-Have Your Say: A Limerick Perspective*, 2014.

³⁴ 'Home', Clare Immigrant Support Centre, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://www.clareimmigrantsupportcentre.com/>.

³⁵ Clare County Council, *Review of Research into Key Target Groups to Inform the County Clare Social Inclusion Strategy*.

opportunities for individuals and families in partnership with members of the immigrant community.

Developments in Policies and Legislation

On 3 March 2015, former Minister of State at the Department of Justice Aodhán Ó Riordáin launched ‘Towards a New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Ireland’ at the Mansion House in Dublin. The report, based on seventy-one interviews carried out with refugees, recommended ‘best practice’ in the areas of active citizenship, employment, media participation, English language training and access to information. However, concerning those not yet granted refugee status, the report recommended shorter stays in DPCs but did not call for the system to be abolished or for the end to deportation.³⁶ Ronit Lentin maintains that while the Minister insists that ‘no asylum-seeker wants to be in the DP system’ and that the Working Group on Direct Provision aims to improve the system, the truth is that both UNHCR Ireland and the government were in full agreement that DP centres would not be closed. This, according to Lentin, was akin to the criminal transfer of public money to a small bunch of profit making-private businesses. On the 30 June 2015, the ‘Working Group Report on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers’ was published. The Working Group Report, also referred to as the McMahon Report, was assigned the following terms of reference among others: to improve existing arrangements in the processing of protection applications to show greater respect for the dignity of persons in the system and to improve their quality of life by enhancing the support and services currently available.³⁷

The main recommendation of the report was to fast-track the asylum process for those in the system for five years or more, stating that those waiting on a decision on refugee status, subsidiary protection or leave to remain in the State for that long should be granted it within six months. The report also recommended that deportation orders should be revoked if the person concerned had been in the system for at least five years. Under the newly proposed single procedure, final decisions on an applicant’s status should be issued within 12 months of the registration of application. While the recommendations for reform and fast-tracking proposals were welcomed by human rights and advocacy groups, concerns were raised for those that were neither new applicants nor in the system for five years or more. Former CEO of the Irish Refugee Council Sue Conlon stated that the Working Group had basically endorsed the practice of allowing people to remain in the system for up to five years, a system which had been condemned both nationally and internationally.³⁸ Liam Thornton argued that the working group did not take Ireland’s international obligations into account, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. He concluded that the McMahon Report reinforced the idea that those in search of asylum are less than human and it only serves to further institutionalise those in need of protection.³⁹

³⁶ Ronit Lentin, ‘Launch of UNHCR Report “Towards a New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Ireland”, 3 March 2015, Mansion House, Dublin’, March 4, 2015, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <https://www.ronitlentin.net/2015/03/04/launch-of-unhcr-report-%E2%80%98towards-a-new-beginning-refugee-integration-in-ireland%E2%80%99-3-march-2015-mansion-house-dublin/>.

³⁷ ‘Working Group to Report to Government Working Group on the Protection Process on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers’, Department of Justice, http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Working_Group_on_Improvements_to_the_Protection_Process

³⁸ ‘The Working Group Report, while welcome, is a missed opportunity says IRC’, Irish Refugee Council, June 30, 2015, accessed 28 November 2018, <https://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/news/the-working-group-report-while-welcome-is-a-missed-opportunity-says-irc/4017>

³⁹ Liam Thornton, ‘The Direct Provision Report: A Missed Opportunity’, Human Rights Ireland, 2015.

The subsequent International Protection Bill which was signed into law on the 30 December 2015 by President Michael D. Higgins failed to implement most of these recommendations. According to Fianna Fáil T.D. Niall Collins, the Bill was ‘shambolic’ in that it failed to incorporate any of the recommendations set out in the McMahon Report. While former Minister for Justice Francis Fitzgerald said that the main purpose of the Bill was to reform the system to facilitate a speedier procedure, Sinn Féin justice spokesperson Pádraig Mac Lochlainn pointed out that it failed to address one of the main terms of reference of the report which was to ensure asylum-seekers were treated with respect and humanity within a framework of more efficient immigration procedures and safeguards. Both deputies expressed concern about the best interest of the child in relation to the legislation.⁴⁰

On 2 July 2018, the EU (recast) Reception Conditions Directive was transposed into Irish law, introducing new provisions to facilitate access to the labour market for eligible applicants. This decision followed a Supreme Court declaration, in February 2018, that Ireland’s ban on employment was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court case was taken by a Burmese national who had spent eight years living in Direct Provision.⁴¹ However, restrictions still apply to asylum-seekers who currently are appealing a negative decision to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal. Furthermore, those whose asylum claims have been rejected, but who are currently within the leave to remain system, will not be granted permission to work. Access to the labour market also remains limited to people who have not received a first instance recommendation within a nine-month timeframe.⁴²

Findings

This section describes the data gathered from interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in the integration initiatives, including those that helped to set up and implement the strategies and those that work as advocates for the promotion of migrants’ rights. The interviewees were drawn from a combination of statutory and civil society organizations. As the areas covered by the research are small and local, the organizational affiliations of the participants have not been mentioned to preserve their anonymity. There were seven themes which emerged from the research:

Relevance of the Strategy

Participant A believed that in Limerick most of the themes of the integration strategy could be applied to asylum-seekers except for the theme in relation to employment. She did however state that the degrees to which the other themes could be applied varied greatly. For example, she explained that one of the action plans was to provide English language classes for migrants in Limerick, however sometimes the level of these classes was not appropriate to the needs of asylum-seekers and so her organization had to provide language classes at a more basic level. On the other hand, she stated that there were many asylum-seekers who spoke English as their first language and so while these lessons were available to asylum-seekers, they were not always necessary. Participant B explained that at the time of the first integration strategy in Limerick from 2010-2012, there were high levels of immigration into Ireland. The impact of the recession was not yet reflected in the numbers of migrants in Limerick. The second strategy, he stated, was built on the success of the first strategy, although the number of migrants coming

⁴⁰ Marie O’Halloran, ‘Asylum Bill ignored Recommendations says Collins’, *The Irish Times*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/asylum-bill-ignored-recommendations-says-collins-1.2462239>.

⁴¹ ‘Right to Work’, Doras Luimní, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <http://dorasluimni.org/right-to-work/>.

⁴² Liam Thornton, ‘Putting wrong to rights (almost...): Asylum seekers and freedom to work in Ireland Part II’, June 27, 2018, accessed Nov 28, 2018, <https://liamthornton.ie/2018/06/27/putting-wrong-to-rights-almost-asylum-seekers-and-freedom-to-work-in-ireland-part-ii/>.

to Limerick had fallen. In terms of integration, both Limerick participants believed that the fact that Limerick was an Intercultural City⁴³ was an important factor to consider for the integration strategy. An intercultural city should create an environment where it is considered a good place to live for everybody, for locals as well as new members of the community. Participant B suggested that all migrants have the same intercultural needs which are covered in the integration strategy.

In relation to the Clare strategy, Participant C explained that the agencies involved in its design looked at the Scottish model of integration when developing the initiative. This model takes a person-centred approach in relation to all migrants, including asylum-seekers and refugees. The participant firstly explained that the plan had not been updated since 2012, as the number of immigrants moving into Clare had begun to fall around this time, and the various agencies involved in the process had been disbanded and some of those involved moved to different agencies. The interview participant believed that of the five themes outlined in the strategy, the only theme which could feasibly be applied to those within the asylum system was the theme of Community Participation. The second interviewee agreed with this and explained that while the strategy may not have included asylum-seekers in all themes, it did as much as it could under the constraints of national policy. The strategy, she remarked, did not seek to be a political statement but it did result in very positive unintentional outcomes in the area of asylum and Direct Provision at a local level. She explained that the interagency involvement in coordinating this strategy ‘put things on the table’ for agencies that would have been otherwise unaware of the barriers to integration for those within the asylum system. She maintained that ‘brave things were done quietly’ under the terms of the strategy.

Barriers to Participation (Access, Transport and Economic Factors)

Participant C explained that integration was sometimes impeded by the location of the DPC and that it could prove difficult to become involved in community activities when transport became an issue. She stated that while all community activities were welcomed, the residents would have to consider the financial aspects associated with taking part in such events. They also had to take into consideration meal times when deciding whether or not to get involved with such activities, so there was a level of restriction around their decision-making process. Participant D explained that if a resident was to be away from the DPC for a significant period of time, they would have to notify the Department of Justice, and she felt that sometimes the degree of the challenge involved would outweigh the desire to take part in the activity. Like the first interviewee, this participant also spoke about the location of many of the DPCs around the country and implied that housing asylum-seekers outside of towns in hard-to-access rural areas was going to impede integration further. It was not always economically feasible for them to take part in events which were some distance from the centres.

⁴³ The Intercultural Cities (ICC) programme began in 2008 as a joint pilot initiative of the Council of Europe (CoE), and the European Commission. The Intercultural City ‘has a diverse population including people with different nationalities, origins, languages or religions/beliefs. Most citizens regard diversity as a resource, not as a problem, and accept that all cultures change as they encounter each other in the public space. The city officials publicly advocate respect for diversity and a pluralistic city identity. The city actively combats prejudice and discrimination and ensures equal opportunities for all by adapting its governance structures, institutions and services to the needs of a diverse population without compromising the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In partnership with business, civil society and public service professionals, the intercultural city develops a range of policies and actions to encourage greater mixing and interaction between diverse groups. The high level of trust and social cohesion help to prevent conflicts and violence, increase policy effectiveness and make the city attractive for people and investors alike’ (Limerick City and County Council 2018).

Time

All participants agreed that time was an issue that often exacerbated factors in Direct Provision. Participant A explained that while community activities were welcomed by participants at the beginning of the process, after five or six years of the same activity with no end in sight, residents often became disheartened and distanced themselves from community involvement. In relation to the specific needs of people living in the asylum system, he said that the greatest challenge was the amount of time spent in the centres. Participant B said that time was a significant factor and that if the system was reformed to reduce the time spent in the centres to under twelve months, this would help to improve the quality of life of the residents. Like the other interviewees, Participant D explained that time was a huge factor in relation to integration and asylum-seekers. She maintained that if the time spent in these centres was limited to about three months, then many of the issues faced by asylum-seekers would not manifest to the degree that they currently do.

The Transition from Asylum-Seeker to Refugee

Participant A explained that sometimes the most difficult area for integration was the moment a resident had received status to remain in Ireland. She described how difficulties arose after a lengthy stay in DPCs, as residents had been so isolated for so long they now found the transition into community living very challenging. They often did not have the social skills that they possessed upon entering the centres, sometimes having endured depressive episodes and other mental health implications while resident in the DPC. Participant B mentioned that many of the residents did not have a network of friends and so upon receiving their status and leaving the DPC, it was much harder for them to integrate themselves into the community. Participant C explained that leaving the centres was an area where integration was a huge issue. She outlined that this was where national policy dictated that integration should begin, while all interviewees believed that integration should begin at the moment of arrival into the new community. The participant also listed issues such as money management and access to employment after such a considerable stay in Direct Provision as further barriers to integration.

Addressing Mental Health Issues and the Needs of Children

In relation to the needs of those within the asylum system, Participant A believed that areas relating to health, including mental health, and quality of living needed to be addressed. The participant remarked that the staff working in these centres do not have social care backgrounds and do not have the skills necessary to work with a vulnerable group of people. The interviewee also stated that if the asylum-seekers were not detained in these centres, the mental health issues which arise from being institutionalised would not be a factor—and in cases where a person was suffering from a mental health problem related to something separate, they would have access to appropriate medical professionals. Participant B spoke about neglect and child poverty, not at the hands of the children's parents, but at the hands of the State. Participant C explained that a positive outcome of the Clare integration strategy was that agencies which would not usually be familiar or involved with the asylum and reception conditions in Ireland became involved in independent research based on the conditions they were met with. This research is still relevant today and it has served as a basis to make recommendations to higher authorities surrounding particular aspects of living in Direct Provision, such as child poverty and development and the mental health implications of living in isolated centres. These recommendations have been largely ignored according to two of the participants. Participant B described how some residents who have spent lengthy periods within the asylum system have 'lost the will to live' and find it difficult to 'keep their heads above water'. Dignity was another

need mentioned by a participant when he emphasised how hard it is to maintain your dignity living in these particular conditions

Employment and Education⁴⁴

Employment and Education are the themes in the strategies which are least applicable to asylum-seekers. In terms of employment, Participant C explained how asylum-seekers often lost professional skills that they had held at the beginning of their application procedure and without regaining their skills throughout their stay, they found themselves at a distinct disadvantage upon re-entering the workforce. The length of time spent in the centres played a key role in people becoming de-skilled in the professions that many of them would have held before leaving their home countries. However, Participant A did state that their organization encouraged asylum-seekers to volunteer where possible to try to maintain contact with the community and acquire new skill sets necessary for future employment. Participant B highlighted that this could become an issue in sectors where it is necessary to obtain Garda clearance.

Structural Weaknesses in the Asylum Process

Participant A believed that integration strategies at a local level could never sufficiently address the needs of those within the asylum system while the system of Direct Provision remained in place. She had been hopeful when the working group was put together by Minister Ó Riordáin that a reform of the system was on the cards, but when her organization was not invited to sit on the working group as they were considered ‘too vocal’, she realised that perhaps the reform would not be as radical as people may have hoped for. She did welcome the fact that Minister Ó Riordáin was the first person in a long time to draw attention to the area and felt that as a result of this, there had been more positive decisions in the previous year. The participant believed that in terms of an appropriate national policy, Ireland should look to the asylum system in Portugal and draw on some of the best practice approaches being implemented there. Participant B spoke about the European Refugee Fund and the European Integration Fund and pointed out that these initiatives were not applicable to asylum-seekers. He said that according to official policy in Ireland, integration begins as soon as a migrant is given status to allow them to remain in Ireland. However, he said that it was the belief of his organization that integration should begin from the moment a person arrives in Ireland. He stated that there needed to be structural reform in relation to this. He said that ‘integration does not sit well with Direct Provision’ and stated that specific resources were needed in that area, and that there should be greater accountability for those that oversee the centres. He stated that the government missed an opportunity with the International Protection Bill⁴⁵ to reform the system to make it a more fair and transparent process. He said that integration was a two-way process between migrant and host community, but that it was more difficult for asylum-seekers to be involved in this process as they were not afforded the same resources as other migrants. He stated that another challenge was that Direct Provision and asylum-seekers were not considered a priority in national politics, adding that with every new crisis that arose, the plight of asylum-seekers would be pushed farther down the agenda. Finally, when asked what could be done to make integration strategies more accessible to those within the asylum system, he responded that there would need to be a change in policy at national level before changes could be implemented at a local level.

⁴⁴ This research was undertaken in 2016 prior to the developments relating to the Right to Work for asylum-seekers and the University of Sanctuary initiatives.

⁴⁵ See Irish Statute Book: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/66/enacted/en/html>

Participant C stated that because of national policy regarding asylum-seekers, realistically speaking, they could not be included in the majority of the themes of the action plan, as it was not legally possible in some areas, especially in those initiatives relating to employment and housing. Within the strategy, they set out actions to improve access to health services and education and made recommendations to RIA and the Department of Justice. However, they were told that RIA was only required to provide bed and board to residents and were not obliged to provide anything further. When asked if local strategies to integrate new communities into Ireland sufficiently address the needs of those within the asylum system, the participant said that they did not meet those needs. They stated that local level actors' hands were tied and that without a change in existing national policy in relation to Direct Provision or a new policy in relation to integration at a national level, they were constrained to continue the exclusion of this group. Participant D remarked that at the launch of the integration strategy in 2009, a government official involved in the setting up of 'Migration Nation' was very uncooperative when asked what his view on the growing number of asylum-seekers coming into Ireland was and how the issue could be better managed. The elected representative felt that, at the time, long-staying asylum-seekers were 'blocking the system' and causing backlogs in the application process for others. The participant stated that the integration strategy was not a political campaign and remained respectful of government policy, while at the same time trying to reach out to asylum-seekers in areas where it was permitted to do so.

Discussion

It is important when evaluating the findings of this research to take into account that the numbers of asylum-seekers in Clare and Limerick differ significantly and the locations of the centres is also an important factor when considering integration. It is more difficult for the residents of DPCs in rural areas to access community activities than those housed in towns or cities. There is a transport cost associated with such activities which is not always taken into consideration by the actors organising such events. However, this is not unique to Ireland, as Bakker et al. described similar conditions in the Netherlands.⁴⁶ Whether the centres are State-run or privately owned is another factor which can determine how DPCs operate, and rigid restrictions around meal times can be a deciding factor when a resident is considering taking part in one of the initiatives outlined within the strategies. The interview participants from Limerick felt that the themes of their strategies were quite inclusive, while the participants from Clare felt that their strategy was not as inclusive as they would have liked. While they had tried to be as inclusive as they could, there were legal barriers constraining their efforts. At the time of research there were three DPCs in Limerick,⁴⁷ two of which were based in the city. There was only one in Clare at the time,⁴⁸ in Knockalisheen, which often falls under the remit of Limerick due to its proximity to the city. Perhaps this explains why the Limerick strategies incorporated the specific needs of asylum-seekers more than the Clare strategy.

Having analysed the responses from the four semi-structured interviews, there are some themes common to all four interviews; Relevance of the Strategy, Barriers to Participation (Access, Transport and Economic Factors), Time, The Transition from Asylum-Seeker to Refugee, Addressing Mental Health Issues and the Needs of Children, Employment and Education and Structural Weaknesses in the Asylum Process. All four interviewees explained that the strategies sought to include asylum-seekers as much as they could, but that it was not always legally feasible. They did state, however, that some of the themes, while not directly aimed at asylum-seekers, could be adapted in ways to make them more inclusive. Themes

⁴⁶ Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen, 'The importance of resources and security'.

⁴⁷ There are currently two DPCs in Limerick; one of the centres has closed since this research was carried out.

⁴⁸ A new DPC has opened in Lisdoonvarna, County Clare since this research was undertaken.

relating to employment and housing were not applicable to asylum-seekers at the time although all of the interview participants believed that this was an area which could be addressed. They believe that employment initiatives aimed at re-skilling asylum-seekers in various sectors of employment should be introduced, so that when they receive status to remain in Ireland, they will not find it as difficult to re-enter the workforce as they currently do.

Education was another area that was not directly applicable to the group, and the outcome of the initiatives would vary greatly based on the needs of the individual asylum-seeker. As mentioned by Sugarman⁴⁹, there is the need for a policy to be drafted in relation to educational options for asylum-seekers. Also, all participants acknowledged that residents of Direct Provision do not have access to adequate health services in relation to mental health issues. Both Slobodin and De Jong⁵⁰ and the UNHCR⁵¹ mentioned that at a global level, the lack of social supports afforded to asylum-seekers and the time spent detained in these centres can exacerbate mental health issues, and we can see that this is no different in the Irish context.

Time is also a significant issue for the residents of DPCs, another factor highlighted by the UNHCR. The interview participants believe that these are issues which are exacerbated by the isolated conditions of Direct Provision and by the length of time that the residents have to endure them. Many residents arrive in Ireland already having experienced traumatic events and they are not offered any support to help them to process and move on from these events. Some develop depression from the isolation of the centres or from being separated from their families for such a long time. These are all problems which further hinder integration into the community when they receive status to remain. Issues relating to children was another theme which was mentioned in the interviews. Children are living in poverty and their basic needs are being neglected. This sentiment echoes Uchechukwu Ogbu et al.'s explanation of how these situations can have a detrimental impact on the cognitive and social development of children living in DP.⁵²

When the elected representative working in the area of integration is less than empathetic when speaking about asylum-seekers, then it implies a great deal about the government in which he works. The most important issue which was prevalent in all interviews and which is most relevant to this project is that without a change in the national policy relating to asylum-seekers, there is not a great deal that can be done at the local level. The local strategies are constrained by government policy. This is similar to the control-centred form of public policy which was covered by Bryer,⁵³ a form of governance based on control through the bureaucratic principles of regulation. Here the actors involved in the strategies are bound by either the direct orders or coercive pressures of elected representatives and the State agencies associated with them. However, in the case of immigration and asylum policy, a discretionary or deliberative approach would be much more beneficial in helping to integrate those in the asylum system with the members of the communities they reside in. This type of approach would be necessary to take the specific needs of the actors into consideration before drafting the appropriate policies which would apply to them and would help to legislate for a fairer and more transparent asylum system. Without this approach, local strategies to integrate new communities into Irish society will continue to fail to sufficiently address the needs of those within the asylum system.

⁴⁹ Sugarman, 'Meeting the Education Needs'.

⁵⁰ Slobodin and de Jong, 'Mental health interventions'.

⁵¹ UNHCR, 'Beyond Detention'.

⁵² Uchechukwu Ogbu et al., 'Parenting in direct provision'.

⁵³ Bryer, 'Toward a relevant agenda'.

Conclusion

The question at the core of this research was ‘Do local strategies to integrate new communities into Ireland sufficiently address the needs of those within the asylum system?’ The answer, given the findings, is that local strategies are constrained by the national policy of Direct Provision and while this system remains in place, people’s hands are tied at the local level. The actors involved cannot breach the legislation in relation to the asylum system and so they cannot include asylum-seekers in all themes of the strategies, much as they would like to do so. They are also unable to draft strategies geared solely at people in Direct Provision, as to do so would go against national policy. While these actors have made recommendations to Government, offering alternative systems and areas where they could improve the system to make it a fairer more transparent process, they have been met with opposition and in some cases disdain. This area of public policy is typical of the control-centred form of bureaucracy that the actors are bound by in the Irish case. A more suitable approach would be one in which those waiting on asylum decisions had some degree of autonomy in their own lives, but while the current system is in place, this will unfortunately not be an option. They will continue to be isolated and excluded from even the most basic aspects of community involvement and at the local level, the strategies to integrate them into their new communities will not sufficiently address their specific needs.

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